

# **The Fresno Bee**

**June 9, 2000**

Mark Grossi  
The Fresno Bee

## **Water plan ready 30-year restoration effort to rescue state waterways will help west-side Valley farmers.**

Today California begins its most ambitious and expensive waterworks overhaul since the 1930s, when the state began damming major rivers. But a new or expanded reservoir is not yet in the cards for Central California.

The governor and the Interior secretary today will announce a plan to save Northern California rivers, clean up drinking water, balance supplies statewide and calm 50 years of legal battles.

After five years of work, the state-federal restoration plan, called CalFed, offers little immediate gratification. Bureaucratic housekeeping over environmental studies and administration will keep this \$9.4 billion, seven-year phase of the 30-year restoration from being official until fall.

For east San Joaquin Valley farmers, the wait will be longer: In the next few years, officials will only study additional reservoir storage on the San Joaquin River, perhaps enlarging Millerton Lake.

A larger lake or another reservoir would provide more water to re-establish flows during summer in the often dry San Joaquin River. But farm officials, who are working with the Natural Resources Defense Council to restore the San Joaquin, are not discouraged.

"I would have felt much better if they had committed to some kind of storage," said Richard Moss, general manager of the Friant Water Users Authority, representing 15,000 farmers who get water from Millerton Lake. "But this is definitely progress. CalFed recognizes our effort with environmentalists to restore the San Joaquin River."

On the Valley's west side, the good news will blossom sooner. The plan sets a goal to increase federal water supplies by 15% for the west side farmers, bringing them to 65% or 70% of their contracted river allotments.

For eight years, west-side farmers have annually lost half their river allotments from the Central Valley Project because federal officials have kept the water in Northern California rivers for endangered fish.

"We want to be hopeful about this," said David Orth, general manager of the 600,000-acre Westlands Water District, based largely in west Fresno County. "Our experience with the federal government to this point has not been promising. But we have faith in Governor Davis."

The plan also calls for buying up to 35,000 acres of bad farmland to prevent future water use. In addition, underground water storage, or a water bank, will be encouraged.

But endangered fish and the environment are still clearly the priority of CalFed.

The plan focuses on repairing the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the 738,000-acre labyrinth of canals and sloughs where 120 species of fish live.

The Delta supplies water for two-thirds of the state's population and 7 million acres of cropland. Pollution, exotic predator species and water pumping caused the Delta's ecosystem to decline in the late 1980s and drove some fish species to the brink of extinction.

To help the natural system, an environmental water account with about 380,000 acre-feet of water -- enough to fill about 75% of Millerton Lake -- will be set up for fish, wildlife and vegetation.

To supply more water, the dam at Shasta Reservoir, north of the Delta on the Sacramento River, will be raised 6 feet so the 4.5 million-acre-foot lake will hold an additional 300,000 acre-feet.

Environmentalists say they see a lot of hope in the plan. Grant Davis, executive director of the San Francisco Bay Institute, said the plan is a major step for California, though it is a work in progress.

"We have some concerns about it," he said.

"They are promising not to reduce project supplies for farms and cities south of the Delta beyond the current regulatory levels. That's going too far. If we have a drought, there's no telling how much more cutbacks will be needed."